

Dr. Panchali Mukherjee

Associate Professor, Department of Arts,

Christ Academy Institute for Advanced Studies

Christ Nagar, Bangalore, India

panchali.mukherjee@gmail.com

Filling An Old Vessel With New Wine: The Study of Iravati Karve’s “Gandhari” And Mahashweta Devi’s “Kunti and the Nishadin” As Feminist Revisionist Mythologies

Abstract: The research paper will study the mythical characters of Gandhari and Kunti through the lens of Feminist Revisionist Mythologies as presented in Iravati Karve’s Yugantha and Mahashweta Devi’s “Kunti and Nishadin”. It elucidates the concept of revisionist mythmaking in relation to re-vision, re-imaging (creation of a new character) and re-interpretation. The paper takes into consideration one anecdote from Yugantha namely “Gandhari” and Mahashweta Devi’s “Kunti and Nishadin” related to these mythical characters and examine them by entering the old texts from the critical perspective of women leading to the re-appropriation of male space for female ends. It shows undercutting the male norm which is the human norm to which the subject and the referent female is the “Other”. The age-old myths support the patriarchal power structure in place but the revisionist reading subverts them in an attempt to erode the base on which the edifice of power is based. The paper studies the way in which the female perspective can unravel the phallocentric nature of myths and challenge their androcentric structure. Myths tend to categorize women in terms of their subservience to patriarchal cultural values but this categorization is disrupted by the revisionist mythmaking. The myths camouflage reality and create a cultural mindscape that shuts out all the possibilities of self-assertion and growth for men. But this trend is challenged by these revisionist

mythologies. The paper shows the myth of motherhood as constructed by patriarchy is an inauthentic representation of exclusively female experience. The paper shows that the myths project marriage as an ultimate goal of a woman's life but the revisionist mythologies disrupt this idea embodied in the myths constructed by patriarchy to keep women shackled. It explores the patriarchal myths that divinize male worldview, gender polarization and attendant behavioral prescriptions as natural creating gender stereotypes which are subverted by the revisionist mythologies. The paper upholds the strategies used by revisionist mythmaking to deconstruct myths that imprison women within the binary opposition with a stable subordinated status. The paper manifests the revisionist mythologies as a consciousness raising program aimed with bringing about cultural changes.

Adrienne Rich states:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival. (qtd. in “Re-visionist Mythmaking”)

The ancient epic of Mahabharata written by Ved Vyasa has mythical characters such as Gandhari and Kunti who have either been given the gender identity of a “pativrata” or a “sati” or else that of a voluptuous woman or a promiscuous woman who could not accept Karna as her son out of wedlock in being a picture-perfect mother to the Pandavas and a faithful wife to Pandu, her impotent husband. It is a well-known fact that the ancient epics are the creation of men in a patriarchal set-up and women have been shown to be tools of manipulation in the hands of men. The various gender identities have been bestowed by patriarchy. Iravati Karve's “Gandhari” from Yugantha and Mahashweta Devi's “Kunti and Nishadin” are examples of revisionist mythmaking which portray the mythical characters of Gandhari and Kunti in a different light especially from a feminist perspective as the narrative “Gandhari” tells its readers that she had blindfolded herself not because she is a pativrata or a blind follower of her

husband Dhritarashtra but because she was angry with her husband and the Kuru clan for deceiving her in getting her married to a blind man. Moreover, in the case of “Kunti and Nishadin” Kunti’s realization and confession of her guilt in relation to Karna for not accepting him as her son during his lifetime and her responsibility for the deaths of the Adivasis for which she is unknowingly responsible as these deaths occurred instead of the deaths of Kunti and the five Pandavas during the conspiracy by Duryodhana at the time of the burning of the house of lac. The narrative shows Kunti to be contrite and suffering resurrecting her image as a woman. It also depicts the injustices done to the Adivasis or the tribal people by the kshatriyas or the warrior caste/class. Mahashweta Devi carefully delineates the character of a tribal woman who is at par with Kunti and questions her in relation to the deaths of the Adivasis including that of her husband and mother-in-law.

Iravati Karve’s narrative from Yugantha and Mahashweta Devi’s narrative perceives the mythical characters and the myths related to them from a sociological perspective making a case in terms of gender discrimination and oppression of women as well as that of the marginalized and dispossessed Adivasis. In “Kunti and Nishadin”, an Adivasi woman has been portrayed to confront Kunti for her past forgotten sin of killing an Adivasi woman and her five sons after alluring them to a feast. The narratives pivot around the issues related to gender and caste or class. It can be considered as an act of survival because such narratives mirror the existent flaws in the social paradigm initiating a process to rectify and obliterate these flaws by administering justice to the marginalized, dispossessed, exploited and discriminated people.

The myths are the most powerful tools used by patriarchy to subordinate women by using language and discourse. A gender identity is attributed to them which is based on a binary logic and a sexual identity that is more of a social and a cultural construct and is embedded in the phallic system. Male view of culture and women’s role in it are imposed as if the male

perception is the only truth. This ideology is internalized by all irrespective of gender (“Revisionist Mythmaking”). In “Gandhari”, Dhritarashtra states:

... We Kuru men have done great injustices to women. And we have paid in full for them too. In Amba's wrath Bhishma was burned. I am still burning in yours. My children too have been destroyed in it. Kunti also was married to a deficient man. But at least she fulfilled the role of a faithful, if not a very beloved wife during her husband's life. After his death, she constantly guarded the welfare of her children. Every person gets entangled in a mesh of injustices. I wronged you. Pandu wronged Kunti. And whose wrong doing was it that Pandu and I should lead such fruitless lives? Can we say that the wrongs done to our mothers, the misery they suffered, brought this curse on us?

(Karve 39)

Kunti in “Kunti and Nishadin” mourns the death of Karna, a son whom she could not accept to be her own although he was born in the same way as her other sons who were called Pandavas. Thus, she repents:

Why did I not find the courage? Why did I not sit with his head on my lap and scream, “He is my first-born. Dhananjay, you have killed your eldest brother. He is the son I deserted fearing public scandal. Had I not, people would have called me an unchaste woman.”

Karna is the only son whose father came to me as I wanted him to.

What a laugh, really! None of the five Pandavas were sired by Pandu, yet they are Pandavas, and Karna? Son of a carpenter! (Karve 28)

Iravati Karve and Mahashweta Devi expose the age-old prejudices against women which have exploited, oppressed and dispossessed women of their rights including freedom. In the first instance, Dhritarashtra himself admits how women of the Kuru clan have been wronged by their men but the women have either burnt in anger and suffered in misery or have played their

roles of dutiful wives. They have willfully accepted the gender identities bestowed on them “pativrata” and “sati” in the case of Gandhari and sometimes that of a voluptuous woman of a questionable character and at other times that of a dutiful wife in the case of Kunti. Iravati Karve and Mahashweta Devi both depict the help provided by religious discourses embodied in the myths to patriarchy in keeping the women shackled and also in marginalizing them. These religious discourses are ultimately social and cultural constructs. Mahashweta Devi’s narrative implicitly projects Marxist Feminism which is focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property by bringing the Nishadin centerstage with her demand for justice from Kunti. The Nishadin is shown to be thrice marginalized on the basis of caste, class and gender. She is an Adivasi, a forest dweller with no possession of wealth and property who has been evicted from her natural habitat and also a woman. She is shown to be more disadvantaged than Kunti and a victim figure.

Myths have a psychological existence. Carl Jung’s perspective regarding myths are the “culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of the human psyche: the world of the archetypes” (Walker 4). The archetypes in the myths are stored in the collective unconscious (“Re-visionist Mythmaking”). In Mahabharata, the mythical character of Gandhari who is an archetype of “pativrata” and “sati” preaches a model code of conduct. Her image as a “pativrata” and a “sati” have survived in the collective unconscious of the Indian culture and has helped patriarchy to psychologically condition women over the ages. The mythical character of Kunti is an archetype of a dutiful wife who does not leave her husband although she knows that he is impotent and is incapable of giving her children but at the same time she is shown to be voluptuous and promiscuous who was not able to accept her son Karna, the fruit of her so-called promiscuity. This archetype too provides a model code of conduct prescribing the do’s and don’t’s for women.

Mythmakers categorize women in terms of their subservience to the patriarchal cultural values. The stereotypical representations of women in literature conveyed through myths and converted into role-models, limit the possibilities of women. Women are either angels or demons (“Re-visionist Mythmaking”). Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) argues that men stereotype women and use it as an excuse to dominate her. Man has always made woman the “Other” in the society by creating a mysterious aura around her. In Mahabharata, Gandhari not only becomes a role-model as “pativrata” but also is the “Other” with no agency who limits the possibilities of other women. In the case of Gandhari in Iravati Karve’s “Gandhari”, the subservience of Gandhari is shown to be a sham as she is engaged in a subtle war against patriarchy to subvert their dictates. Her ploy of blindfolding herself is a rebellion in disguise as she does it not to empathize with her husband who is blind but to express her anger against the deception that was practiced on her in getting her married to a blind man. She displays agency by taking this decision. She is no more man’s “Other” but occupies the central position in the power structure. Thus, her label as a “pativrata” becomes flawed and is depicted as a result of misinterpretation. Mahabharata shows Gandhari to be an angel but Iravati Karve’s “Gandhari” shows Gandhari to be a woman like any other woman. Gandhari accepts:

Before the war, it was only at your urging that I went into the assembly and advised them not to fight. Inwardly I was telling myself that if they fought, the kingship of Hastinapura would remain with my sons. (Karve 34)

Her acceptance actually humanizes her.

In Mahabharata, Kunti is shown to be a dutiful wife and also a woman in darker shades as she became an unwed mother but could not acknowledge her son Karna to be her own during his lifetime which she repents after his death. Mahashweta Devi’s “Kunti and Nishadin” shows her confessing her injustice towards her son, Karna, in the forest, her awareness related to the crime committed unknowingly against the Nishadins by inviting them

for dinner and leaving them to perish in the house of lac instead of her and the Pandavas. She is shown to have agency when she confesses to her injustice towards her son and also towards the Nishadins and decides to do penance for her wrong actions. Moreover, she is no more man's "Other" but is centrally located in the power structure. Even the Nishadin is brought to the center of the power structure by providing her with agency when she asks Kunti for justice.

Women's views are suppressed by keeping women under erasure ("Re-visionist Mythmaking"). It is true because Mahabharata, the ancient Indian epic is the creation of a man conditioned by patriarchy so the women have been represented as patriarchy wanted them to be represented thereby suppressing their voices and not giving them any agency. This representation has further been endorsed by religious discourses. On the other hand, Iravati Karve's "Gandhari" and Mahashweta Devi's "Kunti and Nishadin" are narratives of revisionist mythmaking which seems to give voice to the women who have been voiceless and also provide a glimpse into the psyche of the mythical female characters who have been represented very differently by patriarchy in the epic.

The myth of maternity from a feminist perspective is an inauthentic experience of an exclusively female experience ("Re-visionist Mythmaking"). Motherhood as constructed by patriarchy is not a liberating experience for women as it is misused to subordinate women and to enforce patriarchal laws as universal. Patriarchy glorifies motherhood but not womanhood. Patriarchal concept alienates woman from her body. In Iravati Karve's "Gandhari", this fact is beautifully highlighted through Gandhari's lament after the death of her children in the battle of Kurukshetra she accepts in her grief that the death of each child of hers was a new sorrow for her. As the battle raged on she would ponder each day that how many of them are alive. She exclaims that she had no life of her own, her children's moments of happiness were her moments of happiness and their moments of sorrow were also hers thereby exposing the fact that in a patriarchal set-up motherhood merges with womanhood ("Gandhari" 34). In "Kunti

and Nishadin”, Kunti’s motherhood too merges with her womanhood as during her lamentation in the forest for her first-born son Karna she acknowledges that at the death of Karna, Gandhari is able to lament his death which is like a whiplash to Kunti because she is unable to express her grief for her first-born son as he was born out of wedlock and it would malign her name. Thus, she is there in the forest accepting her sin and that is when her motherhood merges with womanhood (“Kunti and Nishadin” 38).

The romantic love which is self-effacing in nature is glorified in classical love legends of which woman is enamored. It makes women submit themselves willingly to male domination (“Re-visionist Mythmaking”). In Mahabharata, Gandhari’s blindfolding herself is projected as an instance of her devotion to her husband which stems from her self-effacing romantic love for him. Thus, she is called a pativrata although she was misled in marrying a blind man. In Iravati Karve’s “Gandhari”, the self-effacing romantic love makes an appearance when Gandhari opens her blindfold on Dhritarashtra’s request after he reasons with her and accepts the deceit that was practiced on her in getting her married to him, a blind man. She gradually gets used to seeing the world with her eyes. The fact that she decides to perish with her husband in the forest fire shows her self-effacing romantic love for her husband. Thus, she is labelled as a “sati” which is another patriarchal label. In the case of Kunti, neither in Mahabharata nor in “Kunti and Nishadin” does she display self-effacing romantic love for any of the characters but does play the role of a dutiful wife.

Marriage and family too help men to perpetuate subordination of women. A wife who relinquishes her selfhood and identity for the sake of her husband is ever appreciated in patriarchy. The battered woman who bears ill fortune is projected as the role model. These male concepts submerge the identity of women and they internalize the belief that they have certain sexual functions and can have only aspirations appropriate to these functions (“Re-visionist Mythmaking”). It is true as in the case of Gandhari she is deceptively married to a

blind man and made to adjust in that life. She blindfolds herself thereby relinquishing her selfhood and identity. On the other hand, Kunti is married to a deficient man who cannot give her children, had to approach various gods for children but played the role of a dutiful wife.

In Mythologies, Roland Barthes defines myths as made up, illusory thing, the false representations and invalid beliefs prevalent in the society which accept as “natural”. According to Barthes, a mythologist proves that what appears to be natural is in fact artificial constructs that support existing power structures and construct a world for us and decide our place in it. They reflect and explain perceived reality but also convey powerful messages about how reality should be and decide our place in it. The myths are constructed in such a way that they legitimize certain perspectives of culture, history and society. They have strong persuasive power over centuries. They design experience, determine beliefs and transmit a heritage of shared allusion and verbal experience in time to create cultural history. They have an easily digestible story form which are transmitted through cultural institutions, their ideology takes root in the minds of subsequent generations. Repetition gives authenticity to myths and the embedded concepts become undeniable. The ideology in these myths is indoctrinated in the readers which subtly put women in a patriarchal frame. They legitimize the abusive treatment of women (qtd. in “Re-visionist Mythmaking”). Roland Barthes’ exposition related to myth is true as the myths in relation to the mythical characters such as Gandhari and Kunti legitimize the patriarchal perspective of sexist and casteist perspective of culture, history and society. These myths in fact perpetuate abusive treatment of women which are in fact endorsed and supported by religious discourses. Gandhari’s blindfolding herself or Kunti’s giving birth to a son out of wedlock or sons who have not been sired by her husband Pandu or unknowingly killing the Nishadins are all examples of difficult situations in which the women have been placed as a result of their victimization by the society. These situations in turn give rise to characters the narratives of whose lives are used to psychologically condition the women of

succeeding generations. These narratives also offer a panoramic view of the culture and the society with its many flaws in a specific time span. They illustrate the evolution of a particular society over a period of time. It provides a description of the manners, mores and customs of a certain culture or society in a specific historical period. Moreover, re-visionist mythmaking in the present historical period perceive the same myths from a different angle thereby exposing the ingrained biases or prejudices in these mythical narratives.

Re-visionist mythmaking is meant to purge gender bias [and other biases or prejudices] at three levels namely re-vision, re-imaging or re-interpretation. In re-vision, feminist revisionists subvert the original author's intention by changing the perspective. They re-view the myths rooted in male perspective through the feminist lens and rewrite the tale foregrounding female elements. They revise the original representation of woman in order to expose the masculine desires or modes of thinking that underpin the representation ("Re-visionist Mythmaking"). Re-vision is a strategy that is used by Iravati Karve in "Gandhari" and Mahashweta Devi in "Kunti and Nishadin" thereby providing a new perspective to read the mythical narratives. Iravati Karve in "Gandhari" shows her blindfolding to be an act of silent rebellion which is projected as her devotion to her husband in Mahabharata. In "Gandhari", the same incident is revised by attributing a feminist motive to it. Moreover, the dialogue between Dhritarashtra and Gandhari and Dhritarashtra's acceptance of the injustice done by him on her leads to the thawing of ice between the two and both are shown to perish together in the forest fire holding their hands. Thus, Gandhari is branded as a "sati" one who gives up her life for her husband thereby bringing out the feminine aspect in her. She decides to sacrifice her life along with her husband only when she is able to resolve her differences with him. In "Kunti and Nishadin", Mahashweta Devi not only revises the incident of Kunti making a candid confession about not accepting Karna as her son when he was alive and not even being able to lament his death for the fear of being called an unchaste woman. She is shown to accept the sin of giving

birth to Karna in the same way as she gave birth to the other Pandavas but could not accept him as her son because he was born before her marriage to Pandu whereas the other Pandavas were born after she was married to him. Mahashweta Devi highlights this incident to question the significance of a father's name in the formulation of an individual's identity thereby foregrounding a major sociological issue in today's Indian society. She also highlights the sociological issue of persecuting the tribals in today's India through the confrontation between Kunti and the Nishadins. Kunti who is from the royal background and has a royal upbringing juxtaposed with Adivasis or tribals who are the children of nature. It represents a contrast between two world views as foregrounded by two women from different socio-cultural background. The Adivasi woman accuses Kunti of killing her mother-in-law and her five sons one among them being her husband in place of her and the Pandavas after inviting them for a feast in the house of lac which panned out to be fatal for them. Thus, they lost their lives. This incident represents the age-old persecution of the Adivasis by the upper castes and upper classes of the Indian society. The conflict resulted in the appropriation of the Adivasi land by the rich and the powerful without any consideration for the way Adivasis live, the values that they cherish and their close bonding with nature.

Alicia Ostriker in "Thieves of Language" suggests re-visionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to evolve an alternative linguistic medium to make "corrections" to constructed images of what women have collectively suffered. Women writers can try for a self-definition by deconstructing myths that imprison women within the binary opposition with a stable subordinated status. Traditional narratives and symbols perpetuate male hegemony so the male hegemony is deconstructed to promote a vision of equality and equitable production of cultures. Re-vision opens possibilities for multiple views or perspectives. Revisionist mythmaking makes an alternative reading possible by bringing woman to the center or by shifting the perspective from the male to the female. Re-visionists give voice to the silenced

female by re-imaging characters or by re-interpreting the tale (“Re-visionist Mythmaking”). Both “Gandhari” and “Kunti and Nishadin” are narratives in which re-imaging and re-interpretation of mythical characters and plots are evident. Gandhari in Mahabharata is shown to be feminine as she accepts and endures whereas in Iravati Karve’s “Gandhari” she is shown to be feminine but with a dash of feminism in her as she is conscious of her rights, has agency to question her husband and initiate a silent rebellion. Kunti in Mahabharata is shown to be feminine as she is a dutiful wife who is governed by the dictates of a patriarchal society but in Mahashweta Devi’s “Kunti and Nishadin” she is shown to be feminine but again with a dash of feminism in her as she musters courage and shows agency in accepting and repenting her sins regarding not acknowledging Karna to be her own son and also regarding the killing of the Nishadins.

The author who engages in re-visionist mythmaking achieves the purpose but the cultural perception is changed in the process:

... old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead... they are corrections; they are representations of what women have collectively and historically suffered; [and] in some cases they are instructions for survival. (qtd. in “Re-visionist Mythmaking”)

Iravati Karve changes the narrative of “Gandhari” and Mahashweta Devi changes that of “Kunti and Nishadin” to mirror the flaws existing in the Indian society. They through these narratives expose the fissures existing in the society thereby elucidating the social ills such as the patriarchal persecution of women by psychologically conditioning them, creating stereotypes related to them, elucidating the marginalized, oppressed and dispossessed position of women as well as the Adivasis. The members of both these categories belong to the margins of the society. The ancient narratives provide the platform on the basis of which these issues

are communicated so that awareness can be generated regarding them and an attempt is made to resolve these issues.

In Alicia Ostriker's view, re-visionist mythmaking is a means of self-projection and self-exploration. "Re-vision of the myths is a re-appropriation of male space for female ends" ("Re-visionist Mythmaking"). The fact that these tales which had been told by men at one point of time are being retold by Iravati Karve and Mahashweta Devi with the purpose of sociological didacticism and also with the purpose of consciousness raising regarding them whether it's through the mythical characters of Gandhari or Kunti or the fictional character of the Nishadin and the tales associated with them.

Judith Fetterly observes:

The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a revisiting rather than an asserting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. (Warhol 570)

Fetterly underlines the need to apply the feminist critique to evaluate the myths and to expose the materials inimical to female identity in them ("Re-visionist Mythmaking").

The strategies used by revisionist mythmaking deconstruct myths that imprison women within the binary opposition with a stable subordinated status. Iravati Karve and Mahashweta Devi revisit the ancient Indian epic of Mahabharata re-mould it by giving it a new make-up and present it as Yugantha and as "Kunti and Nishadin" respectively with numerous micronarratives under the umbrella metanarrative. The discourse or the agenda of these tales is social emancipation and provide the right kind of orientation to its readers whether it be in relation to women or Adivasis.

Adrienne Rich observes that myths exclude women but they can be re-written to include them. It rejects the universality of the binaries and shows the female self as in the continuous process of becoming. She distances women from the idea of a changeless and a static self ("Re-

visionist Mythmaking"). It thereby opens up imaginative ways for alternative systems of reality and action. They help in cultivating consciousness in women. The most noted aspect of these narratives is that these tales are written from a woman's perspective or a combination of feminine and feminist perspectives or from an emancipatory perspective.

Feminist Re-visionist writings challenge stereotyped images of women. The feminist writers use re-visionist mythmaking as an objective artistry in their writings. They take to re-vision as an art and a framework for rendering subjective experiences. Rosenthal states that they write in the confessional mode in which "private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems" are dominant and in which "the literal Self [is placed] more and more at the center of the poem" (qtd. in "Re-visionist Mythmaking"). The oppression by patriarchy makes them speak through mythical figures. Feminist re-visionists express their repressed emotions, sorrow or anger through a persona without creating the impression that they are too vulnerable. Feminist critics differ in their responses to re-visionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to undo male hegemony. As witnessed in these tales the stereotyping of women such as "pativrata", "sati" and "dutiful wife" are challenged as they are perceived in a new light. The experiences that are rendered are subjective experiences but they are rendered through mythical characters such as Gandhari and Kunti so that a distancing effect can be achieved because these experiences involve private or public humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems. "Kunti and Nishadin" brings up the issue of the marginalization and victimization of the Adivasis and the infringement of their rights.

"Re-visionist Mythmaking" is a strategy which involves close, analytical reading that has been used to do consciousness raising related to various social issues and causes. It is associated with social didacticism and aims at rehabilitating and empowering the marginalized, oppressed, exploited and dispossessed individuals. The experiences rendered are subjective in nature and mythical characters are used to produce a distancing effect. Most of the experiences

that are represented are experiences of the common people. “Re-visionist Mythmaking” is a tool to subvert the existing power structure. Moreover, it gives voice to those who are voiceless. It also resurrects the ancient texts or narratives from the dust of time and popularizes them.

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